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SHIFTING PARADIGAM : DEVADASI SYSTEM –FROM A SOCIAL EVIL TO CULTURAL EMINENCE IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract: Devadasi means a female servant of God. In the word of Dr.S.Muthulakshmi Reddy, a devadasi was an unmarried Hindu female who had undergone the ceremony of a marriage with an idol either in Hindu temple or located anywhere. The ceremony was dedication. Devadasis were adept not only in dance, but also in music, literature and aharya (make-up and costume). Devadasi's life revolved around the temple through the ages. The dancing took place in front of the image of God and occasionally outside, when the idol was carried out in a ceremonial procession. Local potentates , kings, zamindars, and landlords were the benefactors of temples and it was a matter of pride for them to have the most talented Devadasis in temples under their patronage Some devadasis became the concubines of the rich land lords and temple trustees. In their family functions, the presence of devadas concubines was felt necessary and there they were given proper respect also. The power and wealth of temples and devadasis in heyday are legendary. When the Royal patronage was ended and the Zamindars lost their influence, the Devadasis began to suffer economically and their social status began to denigrate. The Devadasis from the beginning of the Twentieth Century began to slowly lose their hold on society. With the emergence of ports and industrial towns, , the old temple towns lost their importance. Alongside brothels, had come up in cantonments, port towns, and in Presidency capitals. The mergence of the women movement affected the immoral ways of Devadasis. Thus The abolition of the Devadasi system was sought through legislation and in the in the first half of the Twentieth Century, the system was put an end in Tamil Nadu. There were some devadasis in regions like Pudukkottai practicing their art and contributing their mite to cultural development. However , chronicled history conclusively established these temple dancers' immense contribution towards defining and channelizing Bharatha Natyam. The Devadasi dance was nurtured by the Isai Vellala Community in the Past and in the first half of the Twentieth Century it was nourished by the Brahmin Community Girls and in the Post-Independent period it developed as 'Bharata Natyam' in which irrespective religion, race and caste all community people sincerely involved. Anyhow, the devadasi family members of yesyears , still are living as legend figures of 'Bharata Natyam'

Keyword: Devadasi, Nattuvanar, Kalakshetra,zamindars,concubine.

SELECTION OF PROCESS OF DEVADASIS

The temple authorities normally laid certain stipulations for the selection of Devadasis. It was important that a girl chosen to be a devadasi should be good looking. Amy Carmichael, a Christian Woman missionary in Tirunelveli District remakes that such girls were often carefully selected for the institution of Devadasis.

The ideal temple child is refined in manner; that passes too often as the years pass, but the child at first is an attractive little thing. No other is of use. She is usually "fair" as the word goes here, anything from olive to hazel-nut colour. She has a certain manner and way of her own, and she is responsive to influence, keen-brained, bright.

The wife of a traditional nattuvanar gives a different description of Devadasis, especially their skin colour. The standards for comparison, however, may differ. Many present-day dancers are Brahmins and very fair. Seen from that perspective hereditary dancers may be seen as much darker: "The dancers of my time were very dark and danced without jewels. The present lot of dancers are fair and wear lots of jewels and people look at their figure."

When dance was a hereditary profession, dancers were selected mainly from the isai vellala community. There were also other ways of joining the profession such as by adoption, or being sold or donated by parents for religious

motives. The Parents without male child promised and dedicated their first daughter to a temple. As most couples desired a son, this was a usual practice to dedicate their girl to the temples.¹

The Devadasi community involved in the purchase of female children of any caste, and also by members of certain Hindu castes vowing to present daughters to the temples on recovering from illness, or relief from other misfortune. The female children of the dancing women are always brought up to the mother's profession, and so are the children purchased by them or assigned to temple service by the free will of the parents².

There were certain procedures before a girl could be dedicated. New applicants to the temple authorities were mainly the daughters of devadasis but their dedication had to be agreed upon by the temple authorities. Heredity alone was not sufficient. If there was suspicion about a girl's character she could be denied dedication and the rights and privileges that went with it.

“One of the main misconceptions regarding Devadasis was that they were a separate caste. At the present day they form a regular caste, having its own laws of inheritance, its own customs and rules of etiquette, and its own panchayats (councils), to see that all these are followed,

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	<p>Indian Streams Research Journal ISSN 2230-7850 Volume-3, Issue-6, July-2013</p> <p>and thus hold a position which is perhaps without a parallel in any country".³</p> <p>In fact, Devadasis were governed by the rules of the larger Isai vellala community which also included men, their wives and children. Thurston describes various artistic occupations of the sons of Devadasis. Some of the sons remain in the caste, and live by playing music for the women to dance to, and accompaniments to their songs, or by teaching singing and dancing to the younger girls and music to the boys. These are called nattuvans.</p> <p>In actual fact these activities were open to all men belonged to the Isai Vellala community. Thurston comments on the women of the Isai Vellala community who married musicians and nattuvanars : "Others marry some girls of the caste who are too plain to be likely to be a success in the profession, and drift out of the community".⁴</p> <p>" Devadasis are the only class of women who are, under Hindu law, as administered by the British courts, allowed to adopt girls to themselves".⁵The comments of some observers indicate that Devadasis had few children, so if the profession were to continue Devadasis had to adopt. "As a rule; it is rare that these women have children of their own, unless, perhaps, they had lived in continual concubinage with some single individual".⁶ In many instances most of the adoption was from other members of their family.</p> <p>Campaign towards Abolition</p> <p>Since the latter part of the Nineteenth Century, a public campaign was in full swing to abolish the institution of devadasi. With the passing of the devadasi Bill, in 1947, dancing in the temples of Tamil Nadu was no longer permitted as part of temple ritual. Its ultimate demise has been attributed to public pressure, largely backed by Dr.S.Muthulakshmi Reddy (1886-1968), a renowned Social Reformer and Legislative Member of Madras Legislative Council. She was also a medical doctor. Her mother was a devadasi and her father a Brahmin.</p> <p>The penalty imposed if a girl was dedicated after November 26, 1947 was stipulated as follows: either six months imprisonment or a fine of five hundred rupees, or both for any person of the age of sixteen or more who dances in contravention of the provision.⁸</p> <p>Dr.S.Muthulakshmi Reddy's comments verify that, although she, like many at that time, was very much in favour of banning the dance in temples, she was also in favour of encouraging the dance, but as an art form.</p> <p>Encouragement of fine arts must not be at the expense of good morals and the health of the race. The arts must be restored to their original purity and grandeur so that respectable, good and virtuous women may come forward to learn and practise them so as to inspire and elevate society to a higher plane of thought and action.⁹</p> <p>Muthulakshmi Reddy's call for a 'revival' was followed by the non-hereditary dancer and teacher, Rukmini Devi founding a dance school, called Kalakshetra (1936) where she improved dance.¹⁰</p> <p>Transition</p> <p>The overlap that occurred between the traditional</p> <p>and modern phases of the dancer is illustrated by the fact that in 1925, T.Balasaraswati, presented her debut recital (arangetram) which formalized her entry into the devadasi profession. A year before, Uday Shankar performed the Indian dance with the ballet dancer Anna Pavlova in London. Clearly the devadasis, for whom dance was their hereditary profession, were still being trained and showed a confidence that they would pursue it as a career, at the same time as the dance was being adopted and presented in a non-traditional context. The transition period when both hereditary and non-hereditary dancers were dancing was full of contradictions. While agitations against the dance in its traditional setting continued, Uday Shankar and his dance troupe toured European countries to perform their Indian dances. Other Indian dancers also followed suit. Abroad these dancers were meeting many famous and established dancers and were generally accepted on an equal footing with the greatest western artists.</p> <p>Testimonies from members of the devadasi community whose relatives were performing, and the number of them who began their training either just before, or after 1947, when temple dancing was officially banned. It seemed to indicate their confidence in the survival of the art, or at least a desire to fulfill their hereditary obligations and maintain their rights and status. "No one could claim to have revived Bharata Natyam, as it was quite alive and well".¹¹ Ram Gopal and his troupe carried on his performance till his last all - India tour in 1947 and then left to be based in England.¹²</p> <p>Descriptions of dance before 1930 give contrasting impressions regarding its status and the status of the audience. Rukmini Devi's biographer, S.Sarada, commented on the first occasion that she saw Rukmini Devi's performance in Madras in 1935: "I had never witnessed a dance performance before, as women from good families did not go out to witness them, either in the temples, or elsewhere." Greatly impressed by Rukmini Devi's dance and vision of it, S.Sarada was later to become an important teacher and dance notator at Rukmini's dance school, Kalakshetra.</p> <p>Not all high caste women were so sheltered. Rajam Iyer, a Brahmin lady living in Mayavaram, a town in Thanjavur district south India, prior to 1934, remembered a different attitude to the presence of women at dance recitals. She commented about her youth: "Whenever a dancer performed anywhere in Mayavaram I was sure to be there, in weddings and temple festivals."¹³</p> <p>In 1934, Rajam Iyer's daughter, Kamala (Lakshman), was born and five years later, in 1939, danced on the concert stage, and in films. She immediately charmed South Indians, and became the darling of Madras. Another event in the mid-1930s that helped to prepare for the acceptance of Bharata Natyam was a performance by T.Balasaraswati, in 1934, at the All India Music Concert in Banaras. The universal appeal of the dance was emphasized by the fact that persons of non-Indian origin such as the American dancer, Ragini Devi, also performed Bharata Natyam at the same music concert. Ragini Devi's daughter, Indrani Rehman, informed that both her mother and T.Balasaraswati danced the same descriptive piece, from the</p>	
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	<p>Indian Streams Research Journal</p> <p style="text-align: right;">ISSN 2230-7850 Volume-3, Issue-6, July-2013</p> <p>Gita Govinda. Presenting Bharata Natyam at the Banaras Conference helped to give it a recognition in North India. The Nobel Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore, presided over the conference which helped to enhance the respectability and prestige of the dance. A distinguished poet, Rabindranath Tagore had already introduced dance as part of the curriculum in his school Shantiniketan, by 1917.</p> <p>It was an exception to find parents who would support their child's aspiration to become a dancer. The popular Tamil writer Kalki R.Krishnamurthy is an example and he first took a vow not to see any dance. Later, he not only became sympathetic to the art, but enrolled his daughter Anandi in dance classes and encouraged her to perform on stage. Likewise the reactions in the 1930s of the internationally recognized male Bharata Natyam dancer, Ram Gopal's parents when he announced his intentions were not enthusiastic: "She [his mother] never dampened my spirit, nor my desire to dance. But father! I was up against a stone wall. His son take to dancing? That ignoble and vile art that had so fallen from its original pedestal and purity, which only temple prostitutes danced and offered other services with their body" .</p> <p>This makes quite a contrast to his own description of the dance of two Devadasis in the 1930s: "In Kumbhakonam I saw Varalakshmi and Bhanumati... it [their dance] was as delicate as the finest brush strokes of a Mogul court painter, as refined and languid as the temple frescos of Ajanta. They made an unforgettable impression on me".</p> <p>Revivalism</p> <p>In the early days of the British rule in India, dance was often included at state functions. In 1791 the Governor of Madras entertained the Nawab of the Carnatic after dinner with 'dancing wenches'.¹⁵ But official patronage was soon to be withdrawn, as this circular from a European official writing at the beginning of the Twentieth Century illustrates: "During my Jamabandy (land revenue settlement) tour, people have sometimes been kind enough to arrange singing or dancing parties, and, as it would have been discourteous to decline to attend what had cost money to arrange, I have accepted the compliment in the spirit in which it was offered. I should, however, be glad if you would let it be generally known that I am entirely in accord with what is known as the anti-nautch movement in regard to such performances".¹⁶</p> <p>In 1905 decision of the executive committee planning the reception for the visit of Prince and Princess of Wales to Madras was that "there should be no performances by nautch girls at the entertainment to be given to their royal highnesses."¹⁷</p> <p>In the 1930s E.Krishna Iyer (1897 -1968), a lawyer, took it upon himself to encourage "respectable" audiences in Madras to support Bharata Natyam. He had seen a lot of dance in Kallidaikurichi, the village in Tirunelveli District where he grew up. His comments support the view that there was a lot of dance at the village level. In 1926, when already a trained lawyer, he decided to study the dance and present it in traditional devadasi dress before respectable audiences.¹⁸ Although it might seem outrageous for a man to dress in female attire, there were precedents for Brahmin males to perform like this in the Bhagavata Mela and Kuchipudi</p> <p>dance style.</p> <p>Certainly there were early references to royal women studying dance particularly at the Vijayanagar Court.¹⁹ There was, however, no recent historical precedent for high caste women, from socially prominent families, to become dancers, perform on the concert stage and keep their status as high caste, respectable, married or marriageable women. Consequently their association with the dance was generally looked down upon.²⁰</p> <p>The "revivalist" E.Krishna Iyer endeavoured to change this attitude as he was aware that it was absolutely essential to involve this social group if the status of the art was to be lifted. He began by presenting the dance in a socially acceptable venue. As a result of his efforts, the first dance recital presented by the Madras Music Academy was by two Devadasis, namely, P.K.Jivaratnam and P.K. Rajalakshmi on 15th March, 1931. Many more recitals at the Madras Music Academy followed later. The repercussions of all this activity were enormous. One of the most important was that Rukmini Devi (a Brahmin), after seeing the dance recitals of P.K. Jivaratnam and another devadasi M.D. Gauri at the Music Academy "resolved to revive it." ²¹ Soon after, Rukmini Devi, a married woman from a "respectable" family, gave her first public dance recital. In the same decade, Kamala Lakshman, another Brahmin, barely five years old, gave hers. Particularly when the high caste people in Tamil Nadu started encouraging this art, everyone followed this practice. Dance was no longer a hereditary profession, nor were there restrictions on marital status or age for the dance recital. It started capturing the minds of all in Tamil society.²²</p> <p>END NOTES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anne Marie Gaston, Bharatha Natyam Temple to Theatre, New Delhi, 1996, p.48. 2. Abbe Dubois, J.A., Castes and Tribes of South India, Vol.2, Madras, 1909, pp.128-129. 3. Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes in Southern India, Madras, 1909, p. 127. 4. Ibid., p.129. 5. Ibid. 6. Sundara Raj, M., Prostitution in Madras, A Study in Historical Perspective, Delhi, 1993, p.117. 7. Mahilammal, S., Women's Movement in Tamil Nadu, 1917-1975, Ph.D., Thesis, Tirunelveli, 2011, pp.136-140. 8. Ramesh, S., Muthulakshmi Reddy's Struggle for Women Liberation in Tamil Nadu, Ph.D Thesis, Dravidian University, Kuppam, 2011, pp.251-253. 9. The Hindu, Madras, 2 December 1932, p.5. 10. Anne Marie Gaston, op.cit., pp.80-81. 11. Sruti, December 1986 and January 1987. 12. Anne Marie Gaston, op.cit., p.82. 13. Sruti, Nos 45 and 46. 14. 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